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# **‘A Great Turkish Policy’: Winston Churchill, the Ottoman Empire and the Origins of the Dardanelles Campaign**

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## **Abstract**

One of the most important players in British/Ottoman relations and the ultimate breakdown of those relations during the Edwardian period and war years was Winston Churchill. Diplomatic historians and Churchill biographers have focused on Churchill's role in the attempted naval conquest of the Dardanelles, the unsuccessful Gallipoli campaign and Churchill's wartime disdain for the Ottomans. In doing so, they tend to portray Churchill's relationship with the Ottoman empire in a negative light, assuming that he, like much of the war cabinet, based his strategies and diplomacy on ideas of European superiority and oriental weakness. However, new archival evidence has come to light which paints a much more nuanced account of Churchill's role in British/Ottoman diplomacy.

Using these new sources such as Churchill's personal correspondence with Ottoman leaders such as Djavid Bey and Enver Pasha, this article will explore Churchill's relationship with the Ottoman empire and his role in shaping British/Ottoman diplomacy. Taking into account the history of Churchill's opinions, attitudes and policies, this article will reveal that Churchill was initially supportive of an Anglo-Ottoman alliance, only to be thwarted by the First World War. It will demonstrate that Churchill's support for an Ottoman alliance owed partially to his Victorian Tory background and to a greater extent, a fear of a pan-Islamic uprising. Ultimately this article will reveal that Churchill's relationship with the Ottoman empire was far more complex than is typically thought and was built on a unique blend of Victorian orientalism, geopolitical strategy and personal sympathies.

**I**n January 1916, Winston Churchill settled in the trenches of the western front in near Ypres. He had been ejected from his position of First Lord of the Admiralty in 1915 owing to the break down of relations between him and Jackie Fisher over the disastrous Dardanelles campaign which ultimately led to the resignation of both parties. Perhaps unconventionally, Churchill sought to redeem himself by joining a theatre of war, personally. Churchill wrote home to his wife from the western front and reflected on how he had come to such a position and on his relationship with Turkey. His official biographer, Martin Gilbert, has argued that Churchill had believed before the campaign that ‘Enver’s followers would abandon the German cause when confronted with so powerful a demonstration of British superiority, and that Enver himself

might perhaps take the lead in shaking Turkey from the German grip'.<sup>1</sup> Remarkably, in his letter Churchill even proclaimed: 'After the war I shall be friends with Enver and will make a great Turkish policy with him. Perhaps!'<sup>2</sup>

This seems like an extremely bizarre pronouncement from a man who had suffered such a loss to Turkish forces. However, it does illustrate that Churchill's relationship with the Ottoman empire is far more nuanced and complex than he is typically given credit for. Many historians and biographers have tended to paint Churchill's view of the Ottoman empire as very negative because they typically view the Dardanelles and Gallipoli campaign in a vacuum;<sup>3</sup> though more recently, scholarship has included the aftermath of the First World War and the restructuring of the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> This ignores the fact that Churchill reflected on the Ottoman empire and Turkey a great deal before the the First World War even started and his positions were often complex and at times contradictory. This article will examine the evolution of this relationship by examining Churchill's early views of the Ottoman empire, and focusing on his correspondence and actions just prior to the outbreak of the First World War. It will further consider how Churchill's view of the Ottoman empire affected his role in the design of the Dardanelles campaign.

Winston Churchill, like his father Lord Randolph Churchill, came from a Conservative political background. Many in the Tory party approached the British relationship with the Ottoman empire in geostrategic terms. The Tory leader Benjamin Disraeli and many other Tories were committed to the structural integrity of the Ottoman empire as an ally against Russian Expansion in Asia and the Near East. Winston Churchill later described the Tory mood on the Eastern Question as 'tremendous and inflexible'.<sup>5</sup> Despite this atmosphere, Lord Randolph welcomed the sacrifice of Ottoman holdings in the Balkans and even reached out

<sup>1</sup> Martin Gilbert (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill*, III (London, 1971) [hereafter *WSC*], p. 248. This refers to Enver Pasha.

<sup>2</sup> Winston Churchill to Clementine Churchill, 28 Jan. 1916, M. Gilbert (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill Companion*, 5 vols (London, 1966-82) [hereafter *WSC,C*], III, pt 2, p. 1402 [hereafter *WSC,C*].

<sup>3</sup> Owing to the number of texts written on Churchill it is impossible to have an exhaustive list of those concerning his views of the Ottoman empire and Turkey. Churchill's own biographer, Martin Gilbert, can be vague on Churchill's relationship with Turkey. In his official biography, Gilbert regularly illustrates Churchill's sympathetic view of Turkey especially during and after the First World War and several instances of this are cited below. However, in his book *Churchill and the Jews* (London, 2007) Gilbert says little more than 'Churchill felt it was time to make a "clean sweep" of Turkey' (p. 29). For examples of studies which show Churchill's view of Turkey as extremely negative see William Manchester, *The Last Lion Winston Spencer Churchill: Visions of Glory 1874-1932* (London, 1983), p. 470; David French, 'The origins of the Dardanelles campaign reconsidered', *History*, 68/223 (1983), pp. 210-24; David French, 'The Dardanelles, Mecca and Kut: prestige as a factor in British eastern strategy 1914-1916', *War and Society*, 5/1 (1987), pp. 45-61; Earl of Birkenhead, *Churchill 1874-1922* (London, 1989), pp. 335-56; Clive Ponting, *Churchill* (London, 1994), p. 170.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, Norman Rose, *Churchill an Unruly Giant* (London, 1994), p. 162; Michael Makovsky, *Churchill's Promised Land* (New Haven, 2007), pp. 89-96; Richard Toye, *Lloyd George and Churchill: Rivals for Greatness* (London, 2012), p. 233. However, these texts do not systematically examine Churchill's relationship with the Ottoman empire prior to the First World War.

<sup>5</sup> Winston Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, I (New York, 1906), p. 99.

to the Liberal, firebrand Charles Dilke, declaring that the aim of the British government should be 'the complete freedom and independence of the Slav nationality, as opposed to any reconstruction of the Turkish Empire'.<sup>6</sup> Lord Randolph's rejection of the 'Conservatives' Turcophilia' can also be seen in his letters to Lady Randolph Churchill.<sup>7</sup>

However, as Winston Churchill pointed out in his father's biography, these views were entirely private. In the political friction between Conservatives and Liberals on the Eastern Question 'Lord Randolph Churchill took no public part' and it is only from his 'private letters that we may learn how decided were his sympathies'.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this indicates that Churchill was not particularly committed one way or another. But a more convincing view might be that Churchill was simply using the Eastern Question to 'sabotage his party's stance' and advance the standing of his Conservative splinter group, the 'Fourth Party'.<sup>9</sup> In any case, understanding Lord Randolph's actual position is difficult because of his numerous contradictory and paradoxical positions on the matter. In an article in *Fortnightly* in 1883, Churchill praised the late Benjamin Disraeli's policies on 'imperial rule' and 'the great Eastern development of the empire'.<sup>10</sup>

While the full complexities of the Victorian politics surrounding Lord Randolph Churchill and the Eastern Question are beyond the scope of this article, it is clear how Winston Churchill understood his father's views on the government's occupation of Egypt in 1882. The biography of his father explains that Lord Randolph believed 'the whole policy of intervention seemed a flagrant political blunder and a crowning violation of Liberal principles'. Winston believed his father saw it as a 'wicked' and an 'unjust war'.<sup>11</sup> Though the occupation was reluctantly supported by the majority of the Conservative Party on the grounds that 'the ministers had done their duty to the national interest', their support might well have been a political gamble to undermine the Liberal Party and its leader William Gladstone.<sup>12</sup> Though Gladstone was unenthusiastic about British intervention, he allowed his government, as Winston Churchill put it, to be 'dragged deeper and deeper into the horrible perplexities of the Egyptian riddle'.<sup>13</sup> Despite his initial hesitation, eventually Gladstone embraced his role as imperialist and had 'eager outbursts of triumphalism and vainglory'.<sup>14</sup>

This reverse from Gladstone's approach to foreign policy illustrates to some degree the cultural lens through which he and the Liberal Party

<sup>6</sup> Lord Randolph Churchill to Charles Dilke, 8 Feb. 1878; *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> Roy Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill: A Political Life* (Oxford, 1981), p. 45; Lord Randolph to Lady Randolph, 11 May 1877, CHAR 28/5, The Churchill Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge.

<sup>8</sup> Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p. 99.

<sup>9</sup> Roy Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, pp. 44–5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p. 223.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Shannon, *Gladstone: Heroic Minister 1865–1898* (London, 1999), p. 306.

<sup>13</sup> Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p. 225.

<sup>14</sup> Shannon, *Gladstone*, p. 306.

understood the British relationship with the east, and the Ottoman empire in particular. He tended to see the Ottoman empire in religious terms and thus as an 'outsider' in Europe. In a letter to Edwin Freshfield, Gladstone said: 'With regard to the condition of the Turkish Empire I cannot regard the Musselman rule in Europe as normal or permanent', though he stops short of saying they should be forced past the straits and out of Europe. He does add that: 'in Asia I have ever supposed they had a greater chance of duration with a fairer field'.<sup>15</sup> This is confirmed by his denunciation of the Berlin Treaty in 1880 which re-established a greater Turkey-in-Europe by altering the Treaty of San Stefano Treaty of 1878. Compounding Gladstone's anti-Ottoman outlook was his sincere philhellenic approach to the eastern Mediterranean. He supported Greek claims in Thessaly, Epirus and Crete and lambasted the Berlin treaty as 'insane' because he thought it supported the integrity of Ottoman holdings against Greek territorial ambitions.<sup>16</sup> These differences in world-view between the Conservatives and Liberals had interesting effects on the young Churchill's understanding of the Ottoman empire.<sup>17</sup>

One of Churchill's earliest and serious reflections on the Ottoman empire was before his departure for India in 1897. In a series of letters between Churchill and his mother, they argued over the situation in the Balkans and the impending Graeco-Turkish War.<sup>18</sup> The Conservative government of the Marquess of Salisbury had adopted a policy of non-intervention, holding that Crete should remain with the Ottoman empire. This was highly controversial and unpopular because the Ottomans had massacred nearly 10,000 Christians on Crete and it appeared as if the Salisbury government was backing 'the cause of Moslem barbarism'.<sup>19</sup> Lady Randolph implored Winston to try to understand that the Salisbury government was acting in the interest of the British empire in relation to the concert of Europe. However, perhaps echoing his father's earlier positions, Churchill saw the political inaction and courting of the Ottoman empire as an illogical and unethical foreign policy.<sup>20</sup> On 6 April 1897, he wrote what seemed to be his final observation on the subject. He noted that Britain was 'doing a very wicked thing' and that he believed the goal of Lord Salisbury's foreign policy in the region was to keep Russia out of Constantinople even at the cost of 'those oppressed by the [Turkish] Empire'. Churchill concluded by arguing:

<sup>15</sup> W. Gladstone to E. Freshfield, 13 Nov. 1871; H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, VIII (Oxford, 1982), p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> On Gladstone's and Liberal philhellenism see Shannon, *Gladstone*, pp. 190, 223.

<sup>17</sup> See Richard Toye, *Churchill's Empire: The World that Made Him and the World He Made* (London, 2011), pp. 3–61.

<sup>18</sup> See Mehmet Uğur Ekinci, *The Unwanted War: The Diplomatic Background of the Ottoman-Greek War of 1897* (Ankara, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> *WSC*, C, I, pt 2, p. 735.

<sup>20</sup> Winston Churchill and Lady Randolph Churchill in a series of letters, spring of 1897; *WSC*, C, I, pt 2, pp. 734, 735, 740, 748.

This is not only wrong it is foolish. It is wrong because it is unjustifiable to kill people who are not attacking you ... and because it is an abominable action which prolongs the servitude under the Turks of the Christians races. It is foolish because as surely as night follows day – the Russians are bound to get to Constantinople. We could never stop them even if we wished. Nor ought we wish for anything that could impede the expulsion from Europe of the filthy oriental.<sup>21</sup>

This letter serves as an example of Churchill's initial 'orientalist' view of the Ottoman empire. This can be seen in his characterization of the struggle as between Christian countries and Muslim countries. However, Churchill quickly reversed his position, declaring in a letter to his mother that 'the declaration of war by Turkey on Greece [had] changed all [his] plans'. He then expressed a desire to join the battle between the two Balkan powers. However, perhaps counter-intuitively, he could not choose which side to join because, while his sympathies were 'entirely with the Greeks', he thought that 'the Turks are bound to win, they are in enormous strength and will be on the offensive the whole time'.<sup>22</sup>

By 28 April he made up his mind to fight *on the side of the Ottomans* and asked his mother to send money to the Ottoman bank. However, Churchill feared the Balkan War would be over too soon for him to get involved. According to Churchill's autobiography *My Early Life* (1930), he met Ian Hamilton (later Sir General Ian Hamilton) on the transfer boat, and while Hamilton had promised his service to Greece, Churchill had promised his to Turkey. While Churchill's peculiar allegiance to Turkey largely owes to his lust for glory, an additional explanation might be that he inherited a 'Turkophile' attitude from his father. Churchill went on to write that Hamilton was a 'romantic' and was thus 'for the Greeks', while he 'having been brought up a Tory ... was for the Turks'.<sup>23</sup> However, their formal confrontation was not to be, for by the time they reached their port of call at Port Said in Egypt, the war was over. Churchill lamented his lost adventure in a letter to his mother in late May 1897: 'I have reluctantly had to give up all hopes of Turkey as the war has fizzled out – like a damp firework'.<sup>24</sup>

The flexibility of Churchill's views on Turkey might be seen in light of his own ambiguous political identity during the early years of his career. It was already evident that by 1897, Churchill 'did not regard the Conservative Party as his natural political home'.<sup>25</sup> In the same letter in which he denounced Lord Salisbury's foreign policy with Russia and Turkey as 'foolish' and 'wicked', Churchill confessed to his mother that he was 'a Liberal in all but name'.<sup>26</sup> Despite this, Churchill entered parliament in 1900 as a Conservative, but by 1902

<sup>21</sup> Winston Churchill to Lady Randolph Churchill, 6 April 1897, CHAR 28/23/31–33A.

<sup>22</sup> Winston Churchill to Lady Randolph Churchill, 21 April 1897; CHAR 28/23/36–8.

<sup>23</sup> Winston Churchill, *My Early Life* (London, 1930), p. 121.

<sup>24</sup> Winston Churchill to Lady Randolph Churchill, 26 May 1897; CHAR 28/23/41A–41B.

<sup>25</sup> Toye, *Churchill's Empire*, p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> Winston Churchill to Lady Randolph Churchill, 6 April 1897, CHAR 28/23/31–33A.

he had become frustrated with the Conservative Party's penchant for protectionist economic policies. In May 1904 Churchill formally switched to the Liberal Party, not as a rejection of Conservative foreign policy with Turkey but from an interest in domestic social reform.<sup>27</sup>

Despite his becoming a 'Liberal *enfant terrible*', Churchill's view of Britain's foreign policy toward Turkey remained closer to the traditional Conservative perspective.<sup>28</sup> As Colonial Under-Secretary in 1907 Churchill visited Cyprus and supported the Turkish claims on the island as well as the minority rights of the Turkish Cypriots.<sup>29</sup> Churchill was also careful to keep an eye on state of Anglo-Turkish affairs during the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 while he was President of the Board of Trade. Hubert Llewellyn Smith, the Permanent Secretary to the Board of Trade, wrote Churchill that 'with what's going on in Turkey' Britain must be on 'alert to protect and advance British interests as what's taking place is bound to affect the relative influence of different Powers and may lead to quite unexpected results'.<sup>30</sup> Churchill also told his friend Paul Schoenberg he was 'interested in Turkish affairs' and received a letter from Schoenberg which warned of the unpopularity of the Dette Publique and the Regie des Tabacs in Turkey, urging a more laissez-faire approach to Ottoman debt.<sup>31</sup> But Churchill's most obvious move towards thinking of Turkey as a potential ally prior to 1911 can be seen in his report to Edward Grey after meeting Enver Bey Pasha in Berlin in 1909. Churchill praised Enver for 'the part he played in recent events and told him with how much sympathy it had been watched in England'. Churchill also explained that while 'both great Parties at home where well disposed' to the new regime, Turkey should take care to avoid a war with Greece in the near future because 'it would be an embarrassment to us, in England and especially to those in the Liberal Party'. Churchill then moved to defend the British interests in Turkey, telling Enver that he feared the 'financial reorganisation' undertaken by the new Turkish Government might 'impose some hardships' for Britain.<sup>32</sup> Despite this Churchill, left with a very positive impression of Enver and the Young Turk Movement. He told Grey, that Enver had 'impressed me very favourably indeed' and he later described Enver as 'a fine looking young officer'<sup>33</sup> and 'a would-be Turkish Napoleon'.<sup>34</sup>

Churchill's sympathy for the new Turkish regime helps explain one of his first endeavours at the Admiralty. He sought to forge a political and

<sup>27</sup> Toye, *Churchill's Empire*, p. 95.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>29</sup> Churchill, Colonial Office report, Colonial Office, National Archives, Kew CO/883/7/3; See W. Dockter, *Churchill and the Islamic World: Orientalism, Empire and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (London, 2015), pp. 41–3.

<sup>30</sup> Hubert Llewellyn Smith to Winston Churchill, 11 Aug. 1908; CHAR 11/3.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Schoenberg to Winston Churchill, 13 Aug. 1908; CHAR 2/35/12–13.

<sup>32</sup> Churchill to Edward Grey; Report on Conversation with Enver Bey, 22 Sept. 1909; CHAR 2/39/93–100.

<sup>33</sup> Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, V: *The Aftermath* (London, 1929), p. 356.

<sup>34</sup> Churchill, *My Early Life*, pp. 56–7.



strategic relationship with the Ottoman empire. Prior to the First World War, Anglo-Turkish relations hung in a delicate balance. Both Britain and Germany attempted to sway Turkey to their side, further illustrating that 'Churchill tried to encourage an actively pro-Turkish policy before 1914'.<sup>35</sup>

In July 1910, Churchill, his wife Clementine and a group of friends went on a holiday to Constantinople. Though Churchill was Home Secretary at the time he did not shy away from informal diplomacy. During a stopover at Constantinople, Churchill met the Sultan, the German ambassador, Marschall von Bieberstein, and several leading members of the Young Turk movement including Enver. Though Churchill had no diplomatic brief, he suggested to the Pashas that the Ottomans should remain neutral in any European struggle that might arise, urging them to 'remain the courted party rather than one which is engaged'.<sup>36</sup> According to biographer Rene Kraus, Churchill even spoke to Bieberstein about the possibility of Germany and Britain splitting the Baghdad railway as allies.<sup>37</sup> After returning to Britain Churchill met with his friend Wilfrid S. Blunt in October 1910, who recorded Churchill's thoughts and reflections on his trip:

At Constantinople [Churchill] stayed four days and had been taken to see the new sultan, but found him uninteresting indeed senile. Djavid Pasha had shown him about and talked with several Young Turks, also with Bieberstein, the German ambassador, of whose ability he formed a high opinion. The Germans have got the better of our diplomacy there. He had brought away a great sympathy with the Young Turks and was all for them being encouraged and supported.<sup>38</sup>

However, the notion of a Turkish alliance really came to the fore in Churchill's mind in 1911. The Agadir Crisis in July that year convinced Churchill that war was coming to Europe.<sup>39</sup> By August Churchill had written a memorandum which speculated how German and Austrian forces might invade France.<sup>40</sup> However, these early memos did not mention the Ottoman empire as allied to either the Entente or Central Powers. In late 1911, Churchill received a letter from a war correspondent named H. C. Seppings Wright. Seppings Wright had been covering the Libyan War, which arose when Italy annexed the Ottoman prefecture of Libya. He reported to Churchill that the Italians committed 'a wholesale massacre of helpless women, children and old people' and that 'if a nation of cannibals had been let loose they could not have committed

<sup>35</sup> Martin Gilbert, Winston S Churchill (Minerva, London: 1991), III: *The Challenge of War, 1914–1916*, Minerva Edition (London, 1990), p. 189.

<sup>36</sup> Wilfrid S. Blunt, *My Diaries: Being a Personal Narrative of Events, 1888–1914* (New York, 1923), p. 736.

<sup>37</sup> Rene Kraus, *Winston Churchill* (London, 1941), p. 158. Churchill also raised this idea with Enver Pasha in 1909 as a way to alleviate Turkish debt and improve relations, see CHAR 2/39/93–100.

<sup>38</sup> Blunt, *Diaries*, pp. 735–6.

<sup>39</sup> Churchill's notes on the Agadir Crisis, CHAR 2/89/26–32.

<sup>40</sup> Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis: 1911–1918*, abridged edn (London, 2005), pp. 39–41.



more abhorrent outrages'.<sup>41</sup> This caused great concern because Churchill had received a letter from Djavid Bey, who wondered if the time had arrived 'for a permanent alliance between our two countries?'. Djavid Bey continued by assuring Churchill that his views would be considered 'entirely personal and unofficial' but that he would be happy if 'we can prepare a possible ground for official purposes'.<sup>42</sup>

Before responding to Djavid Bey, Churchill wrote to Edward Grey the Foreign Secretary on 4 November 1911 to give his opinions regarding the letter. Churchill argued that 'Italy has behaved atrociously' and that even the Liberal party 'must be stirred against the Italians'. However, he was also aware of 'a strong historical Turkish party among the Conservatives throughout the country' and that 'we must not forget that we are the greatest Mohammedan power in the world. We are the only power who can really help and guide [Turkey]'. Further underlining his hope that the Ottoman's might be brought in as an ally against the Central powers Churchill wrote: 'Have we not more to apprehend from the consequence of throwing Turkey ... into the arms of Germany'. He continued: 'this is not intended to advocate a Turkish alliance at the present time but to emphasize the importance of two steps – first a sympathetic and respectful consent of the Turkish appeal, and secondly a clear protest against the vile massacres of woman and little children which have dishonoured the Italian arms'. Churchill concluded by saying that 'a turn, or even a gesture might produce a lasting impression on the Mahometan world'.<sup>43</sup>

Churchill's letter was significant because it demonstrates his appreciation that the British Empire was 'the greatest Mohammedan power in the world'<sup>44</sup> and that Britain was the 'only power who can really help and guide [Turkey]'. In fact, it is remarkable that Churchill used this concept in official policy documents. While the notion that the British Empire was 'the greatest Mohammedan power in the world' had been in British academic circles since the early 1880s,<sup>45</sup> and was occasionally referenced by statesmen concerned with the east (especially after the census in 1901), Churchill may have actually come to this notion while he was in Constantinople meeting several members of the Young Turks.

<sup>41</sup> H.C. Seppings Wright to Churchill, 18 Dec. 1911; CHAR 2/53/84.

<sup>42</sup> Djavid Bey to Winston Churchill, 28 Oct. 1911 in *WSC, C*, II, pt 2, p. 1368. It is remarkable that Churchill and Djavid Bey actually kept a correspondence going since Churchill had visited Constantinople, congratulating one another on promotions and keeping one another informed about state developments. These letters probably contributed to Churchill's admiration for the CUP and the Young Turk movement in general. For examples of their correspondence see CHAR 2/52.

<sup>43</sup> Winston Churchill to Sir Edward Grey, 4 Nov. 1911 in Gilbert *WSC, C*, III, pt 2, pp. 1369–70.

<sup>44</sup> There were approximately 20 million Muslims in Turkey in 1910. In British India there were approximately 62 million Muslims and 10 million Muslims in Egypt.

<sup>45</sup> In *How India Was Won by England Under Clive and Hastings* (London, 1881), the author Rev. Savile quoted Professor Monier Williams (Oxford) who said of British subjects: 'Nearly 41 millions are Mohammedans; so that England is by far the greatest Mohammedan power in the world, so that the Queen reigns over about double as many Moslems as the Representative of the Khalif himself' (p. viii).

One of the Young Turks, named Sabah-ed Din (who was a relative of the Sultan), wrote editorials that appeared in imperial British papers such as *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), *The Singapore Free Press* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* from 1908 to 1912, arguing for an Anglo-Turkish alliance on the grounds that the large number of Muslim subjects made the two powers natural allies.<sup>46</sup> Having been in contact with such currents of thought, it seems plausible that Churchill heard this notion while he was in Constantinople and adopted it when he returned to London. The fact that Churchill had previously never referenced the number of Islamic subjects in the British and Ottoman empires despite having an admitted preference for the Ottomans (as opposed to the Greeks) adds weight to the idea that he picked up the notion of an alliance based on the religious similarity of imperial subjects. This is further strengthened by the fact that Djavid Bey chose specifically to write to Churchill to propose such an alliance, which suggests he believed that the Young Turks formed a positive relationship with Churchill.

Likewise, Churchill understood the importance of working with the Islamic community, especially in this period. Despite the fact that there were elements of strategic positioning against Germany and a fear of a pan-Islamic disruption in Churchill's motivations here, there was also simply an interest in oriental culture. It must be remembered that this letter was written by a man who had spent a considerable amount of time in Islamic countries as a young subaltern, and was critical of his superiors in the military and in politics for their harsh methods of war and punitive expeditions against their Muslim rivals. So while Churchill's main concern was British interests, his understanding of the Islamic world and his concern for Muslim populations (both inside and outside the British Empire) undoubtedly played a role in his thinking.

Churchill received Grey's response on 9 November,<sup>47</sup> and saw that the Foreign Office wanted to send something 'mellifluous' but 'would not agree to anything substantial' despite Churchill's wish to send an 'encouraging' reply.<sup>48</sup> Churchill wrote back to Djavid Bey on 19 November to explain that Britain 'definitely declared' its neutrality and as a result Churchill lamented that his answer must be 'that at the present time we cannot enter upon new political relations'. Despite the diplomatic tone that Churchill was forced to adopt by Grey and the Foreign Office, his genuine interest in maintaining an alliance with Turkey is visible. Churchill went on to say that: 'In the future the enormous interests which unite the two great Mussulman powers, should keep us in touch. That is our wish.' Churchill concluded that: 'We earnestly desire to revive

<sup>46</sup> See Sabah-ed Din, 'Lords of Islam: why an Anglo-Turkish entente may come', in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, 19 Oct. 1912, p. 8, and in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 1 Nov. 1912, p. 3. Also see additional editorials in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1908; Mohamad Abdalla, *Islam and the Australian News Media* (Sydney, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Lord Grey to Churchill, 9 Nov. 1911 in *WSC, C, III*, pt 2, pp. 1370–1.

<sup>48</sup> Gilbert, *WSC*, p. 190.

and maintain our old friendship with Turkey which while we retain the supremacy of the sea should be a friendship of value'.<sup>49</sup>

Churchill continued to work towards solidifying relations with the Ottoman empire. He sent Rear-Admiral Arthur Limpus to Constantinople as head of the British Naval Mission, to train the Turkish navy. According to Gilbert, Limpus was 'a popular figure at Constantinople; he represented Britain's desire to help Turkey recover her strength after the crushing defeat of 1912 at the hands of the Balkan States'.<sup>50</sup> Churchill urged Limpus to work closely with the Turks and, as a result, many in the Turkish navy became increasingly pro-British. Limpus even began to lay the foundations for a restructuring of the Turkish navy by persuading contractors Armstrong Whitworth and Vickers to make 'an offer to the Turkish government to build necessary installations for new battleships'.<sup>51</sup>

However, Britain was not the only power courting the Ottoman empire. Germany had been working on relations with Turkey since before the turn of the century, before the Young Turks took control of the government. Sultan Abdul-Hamid II had pursued a pan-Islamic stance for some time, as he believed it would 'give some unity to his ramshackle empire' and that it 'deterred those powers, principally France, Russia, and Britain, who already ruled large numbers of Moslems from further despoiling his empire'.<sup>52</sup> This approach was successful, especially with Britain. According to historian David French, 'Fear of a Moslem uprising placed a subtle but nonetheless real constraint on British strategic planning before 1914'.<sup>53</sup> This was not an unfounded fear: the Sultan's agents easily established ties with Muslims in the various European empires, much to European apprehension.

Germany, however, unlike other European powers, saw this as an advantage. Kaiser Wilhelm II was very friendly to the Ottomans. He sent Sultan Abdul-Hamid II a birthday card in 1896, when other European leaders were denouncing the Sultan as 'Abdul the Damned'.<sup>54</sup> The Kaiser even visited Constantinople in 1898 and proclaimed at a state banquet: 'His majesty the Sultan and the 300 million Muslims scattered across the globe who revere him as their Caliph can rest assured that the German Emperor is and will at all time remain their friend'.<sup>55</sup>

In an attempt to draw the Ottoman empire away from Germany in December 1911, Churchill insisted that Turkey 'received what seemed to the British eyes, the most favourable offer ever made to any government

<sup>49</sup> Winston Churchill to Djavid Bey, 19 Nov. 1911; *WSC*, C, III, pt 2, p. 1321.

<sup>50</sup> Gilbert, *WSC*, III, p. 188.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>52</sup> David French, 'The Dardanelles, Mecca and Kut: prestige as a factor in British eastern strategy 1914–1916', *War and Society*, 5/1 (1987), pp. 45–61, at p. 48.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>54</sup> Walter Reid, *Empire of Sand: How Britain Made the Middle East* (London, 2011), p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> Kaiser Wilhelm II, quoted in Peter Hopkirk, *On Secret Service East of Constantinople: The Plot to Bring Down the British Empire* (London, 1994), p. 57.

in history'.<sup>56</sup> The offer included two battleships, the *Reshadieh* and the *Sultan Osman I*, at reduced prices and an offer to build a dock in which to keep them. The Turkish navy happily accepted the terms and a deal was struck. The construction of a new dock would ensure a British presence in Constantinople and increase trade, commerce and the living standards in Turkey: 'Through battle ships and finance, Britain and Turkey were being brought together.' Churchill later write that he 'believed in the friendship between the British and Ottoman empires'.<sup>57</sup>

By July 1914 both vessels were almost ready to leave British waters and make their way to Constantinople. But Churchill was wary of letting such powerful warships leave Britain, owing to the looming threat of war with Germany. His consideration for British interests overrode his interest in helping Turkey. Dan van der Vat, a naval historian, has used this to argue that Churchill did not appreciate the strategic importance of Turkey. Van der Vat argued: 'Apparently, the addition of two capital ships to the Royal Navy was regarded as outweighing the drastically underestimated importance of Turkish goodwill or neutrality'.<sup>58</sup>

But this does not acknowledge Churchill's notion that German diplomacy had already won Turkish affections. After all, Turkish neutrality was still heavily doubted. It was this diplomatic situation that weighed on Churchill's mind, not a dismissal of the importance of Turkish neutrality. As a result, Churchill was compelled to commandeer the ships and immediately consulted the Foreign Office. Grey's response was: 'we must let the Admiralty deal with this question as they consider necessary and afterwards make such a defence of our action to Turkey as we can'.<sup>59</sup> At first, Churchill was content to let the Armstrong Whitworth workers continue delaying completion. But by the end of July, he convinced members of the Cabinet that both ships would be needed against the German navy and, by 1 August, Churchill had *Sultan Osman I* boarded by British sailors.

The Turkish government was furious. This action alienated several of the relatively pro-British Young Turk ministers such as Djavid Bey, and even those who advocated neutrality, which drove Turkey further into the arms of the German empire. However, historian Peter Hopkirk has contended that the 'announcement [of British intentions] was made on the very same day that the Germans and the Turks signed their secret alliance. Although, the British had no inkling of this clandestine accord, it would in fact have more than justified Churchill's decision'.<sup>60</sup> However, Gilbert pointed out that the treaty which Enver signed with German ambassador Wangenheim actually was not that official: 'This treaty was unknown

<sup>56</sup> Churchill, *World Crisis*, abridged edn, p. 274.

<sup>57</sup> Gilbert, *WSC*, pp. 188–91.

<sup>58</sup> Dan van der Vat, *The Ship that Changed the World: The Escape of the 'Goeben' to the Dardanelles in 1914* (London, 1985), p. 27.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>60</sup> Hopkirk, *Secret Service*, p. 57.

even to the neutralist and pro-British members of the Turkish Cabinet. It did not commit Turkey to enter the war at Germany's side, but gave the Germans the overriding influence in the Turkish capital.<sup>61</sup> If Gilbert's analysis is correct and the treaty was largely based on control of influence in Constantinople, then Churchill's action actually did push the Turkish opinion against the British and deconstructed Churchill's vision of an alliance of the two largest Muslim powers. Despite this new 'clandestine accord' with Germany, the aborted British deal was perceived as 'an act of piracy'<sup>62</sup> by the Ottoman empire, which had levelled a tax on their subjects in order to pay the £3,680,650 bill.<sup>63</sup> In fact: 'Thousands of school children who contributed their pocket money to the vessels' purchase marched in protest against the British Government's action.'<sup>64</sup> Churchill even hinted in his *World Crisis* that contributions were not limited to Turkey but spread 'even throughout all Islam'.<sup>65</sup>

The situation in Constantinople was further complicated by the arrival of the German cruisers the *Breslau* and the *Goeben*. On 11 August Admiral Souchon, captain of the *Goeben*, was ordered to 'go to Constantinople as quickly as possible in order thereby to compel Turkey to side with us [Germany] on the basis of the treaty that has been concluded'.<sup>66</sup> Souchon was successful in convincing the Turks to uphold their clandestine treaty. Later that day, Churchill was made aware of the situation and telegraphed Sir Berkeley Milne to keep an eye on the Dardanelles and make sure that the German ships do not re-enter the Mediterranean. On 15 August, Churchill sent Grey a copy of his intended telegram to Enver Pasha, the Turkish minister of war and an acquaintance of Churchill's. Churchill's brief note to Grey on the cover said: 'Don't Jump; but do you mind my sending this personal message to Enver. I have answered this man and am sure it will do good. But of course your "NO" is final.'<sup>67</sup> Grey approved and Churchill sent a telegram to Admiral Limpus to be personally handed over to Enver, thus making it a personal message from Churchill.

Churchill's telegram pleaded for Enver not to 'make a mistake which will undo the services you have rendered Turkey and cast away the successes of the second Balkan War'. But Churchill also warned that siding with Germany openly or secretly now must mean the greatest disaster to you, your comrades, and your country'. He then assured Enver 'that if Turkey remains loyal to her neutrality, a solemn agreement to respect the integrity of the Turkish Empire must be a condition of any terms of peace that affect the near East'. Churchill concluded on a personal note: 'The personal regard I have for you, Talaat, and Djavid and the admiration with which I have followed your career from our

<sup>61</sup> Gilbert, *WSC*, p. 193.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>63</sup> Figure taken from Gilbert, *WSC*, p. 191.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Hopkirk, *Secret Service*, p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> Churchill, *World Crisis*, abridged edn, p. 276.

<sup>66</sup> Gilbert, *WSC*, p. 193.

<sup>67</sup> Winston Churchill to Grey, 15 Aug. 1914, CHAR 13/45/1.

first meeting at Wurzburg alone leads me to speak these words of friendship before it is too late.<sup>68</sup>

This telegram displayed Churchill's personal attachment to his acquaintances in the Young Turks but also Churchill's conviction that a German and Ottoman alliance was a step backwards in terms of advancement of Turkey. From Churchill's perspective an alliance between the Ottoman empire and the British Empire would be a modernizing force for Turkey. However, Grey and Churchill's desire to keep Turkey neutral by guaranteeing her territorial sovereignty was not without its benefits for Britain, not just in terms of strategic location, but also by aligning the wills of the two great Muslim powers. Logistically, this would have kept 'Russia away from Constantinople and the Straits and the Germans away from head of the Persian Gulf'.<sup>69</sup> Whether Churchill was motivated by opportunism or benevolence for his Turkish friends (or more probably a mixture of the two) he still pushed for Turkish neutrality.

However, as Enver remained silent, Churchill's disappointment turned into anger and by the Cabinet meeting of 17 August, his belligerent tone was audible. After the meeting, Prime Minister H. H. Asquith wrote to Venetia Stanley: 'Turkey has come into the foreground, threatens vaguely enterprises against Egypt and seemed disposed to play a double game about the *Goeben* and the *Breslau*. Winston, in his most bellicose mood, is all for sending a torpedo flotilla through the Dardanelles – to threaten and if necessary to sink the *Goeben* and her consort.'<sup>70</sup> Churchill's aggressive posturing and frustration with the situation was on the one hand characteristic of his increasingly defensive nature regarding British interests in the climate of imminent war, but on the other hand seemed counter-intuitive regarding his hopes for an alliance of the two great Muslim powers. Perhaps ironically, Kitchener (the man Churchill criticized for his harsh treatment of Muslims) was urging the Cabinet not to be aggressive against the Ottoman empire due to the Muslim population in the British Empire.<sup>71</sup> Grey agreed with Kitchener and thought it best to delay Turkey's entry into the war as long as possible in order to 'stand well in the eyes of [British] Moslem subjects'.<sup>72</sup> According to Grey's autobiography, he was persuaded to take this position:

An Indian personage of very high prestige in the Moslem world came to see me. He urged earnestly that Turkey should be kept out of the war: if we were at war with Turkey it might cause great trouble for Moslem British subjects and be a source of embarrassment both to them and to us ... he

<sup>68</sup> Winston Churchill to Enver Pasha, 15 Aug. 1914, CHAR 13/45/96–99. The second paragraph was actually added by Grey before Churchill sent the telegram.

<sup>69</sup> French, 'Prestige', p. 48.

<sup>70</sup> Herbert Asquith to Venetia Stanley, 17 Aug. 1914, in Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds), *H. H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 170–2; see also Herbert Asquith, *Memories and Reflections: The Earl of Oxford and Asquith*, II (London, 1928), p. 26.

<sup>71</sup> Aaron Klieman, 'Britain's War Aims in the Middle East in 1915', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 3/3, 'The Middle East' (1968), p. 238.

<sup>72</sup> French, 'Prestige', p. 48.



then urged that, if it was impossible to avoid war with Turkey, it should come in [a] way as to make it clearly and unmistakably not our fault; that it should be evident that we had done all that was possible to avoid war.<sup>73</sup>

Kitchener and Grey's fear of a pan-Islamic uprising carried the day, despite Churchill's aggressive and irrational posturing in the Cabinet meeting. Churchill's behaviour might be explained by the idea that he felt personally betrayed by Enver and his other friends in the Turkish government. In *The World Crisis: The Aftermath* (1929), Churchill included a footnote saying he personally knew Turkish leaders.<sup>74</sup> After all, Churchill told Grey that he thought he had great sway with Enver and could help the situation, though he had been unable to do so.

However, a turn of events the next day (18 August) raised Churchill's hopes again. Sir Louis Mallet, the British ambassador in Constantinople, telegraphed The Foreign Office that Enver was 'delighted with the offer of respect for Turkish territorial integrity' and that 'public feeling would be affected immediately if His Majesty's Government would authorize ... an announcement at once that the seizure of Turkish ships was not permanent'.<sup>75</sup> Mallet also reported that a 'public promise' for the return of the ships in good order would aide British support in the Turkish population.

Upon hearing this news through Grey, Churchill immediately tried to salvage the British position with the Ottoman empire. He wrote to Admiral Trowbridge, a naval commander in the Mediterranean who was guarding the mouth of the Dardanelles, that he was to 'show no hostile intentions to Turkey' and to 'use no threats' and to 'keep in touch with the Ambassador at Constantinople'.<sup>76</sup> However, later that day Mallet reported to Grey that the naval minister in Turkey, Ahmed Djemal, was 'heart broken at the loss of his ships' and that the British 'could not understand what an effect [their] action had had throughout the Mussulman world and to what extent it was being exploited by Germany'. Mallet added that if the First Lord would send a 'sympathetic and friendly message ... it would be well received'.<sup>77</sup>

Churchill telegraphed at once to Enver to try to defuse the situation. He began by explaining that he 'deeply regretted the necessity for detaining the Turkish ships because I know the patriotism with which the money had been raised all over Turkey'. Churchill then proposed the following arrangement provided that 'the last German officer and man belonging to the *Goeben* and *Breslau* leaves Turkish waters' and 'so long as Turkey maintains a loyal and impartial neutrality':

- (1) Both ships to be delivered to Turkey at the end of the war after being thoroughly repaired at our expense in British Dockyards.
- (2) If either is

<sup>73</sup> Edward Grey, *Twenty-Five Years 1892–1916*, III (London, 1935), p. 122.

<sup>74</sup> Churchill, *World Crisis*, V, p. 356.

<sup>75</sup> Sir Louis Mallet to the Foreign Office, 18 Aug. 1914, CHAR 13/45/142.

<sup>76</sup> Winston Churchill to Vice Admiral Troubridge, 18 Aug. 1914, CHAR 13/35/59.

<sup>77</sup> Sir Louis Mallet to the Foreign Office, 18 Aug. 1914, CHAR 13/45/139–40.



sunk we will pay full value to Turkey immediately on the declaration of peace. (3) We will also pay at once the actual extra expense caused to Turkey by sending out crews and other incidents as determined by an arbitrator. (4) As a compensation to Turkey for the delay in getting the ships we will pay £1000 a day in weekly installments for every day we keep them, dating retrospectively from when we took them over.<sup>78</sup>

Churchill sent the letter to Admiral Limpus, who delivered the letter to the Turkish naval minister along with the message, 'that had I had the pleasure of his acquaintance I should have addressed myself directly to him'.<sup>79</sup> This letter illustrated Churchill's desire to keep the Ottoman empire neutral at the very least. The letter to Enver offered substantial compensation for the two ships and their eventual return, just as Enver had asked. However, already having signed the secret treaty with the Germans, Enver was probably following Churchill's early advice to 'remain the courted party'. Whatever the case, it was a time of great tension and confusion between the great Muslim powers. Churchill later stated:

I can recall no great sphere of policy about which the British Government was less completely informed than the Turkish. It is strange to read the telegrams we received through all channels from Constantinople during this period in light of our present knowledge. But, all the Allies, now encouraged by the friendly assurances of the Grand Vizier and the respectable-effete section of the Cabinet ... believed that Turkey had no policy and might still be won or lost.<sup>80</sup>

Churchill's efforts were in vain. Enver decided (without full support of the Turkish parliament) to support Germany and the Central Powers and refused to hear Churchill's proposal. As a result, the next time the British Cabinet met, Asquith reported Churchill's mood as 'violently anti-Turk' and that it was he, rather than Churchill, who was 'against any aggressive action vis a vis [sic] Turkey which would excite our Mussulmans in India and Egypt'.<sup>81</sup>

As the situation escalated in the Mediterranean, Churchill was anxious to begin the new front. In *The World Crisis: 1911–1918*, he wrote: 'Lest it should be thought that I underrated the gravity of war with Turkey, it must be remembered that I had convinced myself that Turkey would attack us sooner or later.'<sup>82</sup> Despite this, Churchill continued to work toward Turkish neutrality until the very end when Enver committed the Ottoman empire to the Central Powers in October 1914. As a result of Turkey becoming increasingly coy about their neutrality Churchill resolved: 'If we were not going to secure honest Turkish neutrality, then let us, in the alternative, get the Christian States of the Balkans on our side.'<sup>83</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Winston Churchill to Enver Pasha, 19 Aug. 1914 CHAR 13/45/141.

<sup>79</sup> Winston Churchill to Admiral Limpus, 18 Aug. 1914 in Gilbert, *WSC, C*, III, pt 1, p. 45.

<sup>80</sup> Churchill, *World Crisis*, abridged edn, p. 277.

<sup>81</sup> Herbert Asquith to Venetia Stanley in Brock, *Asquith*, p. 186.

<sup>82</sup> Churchill, *World Crisis*, abridged edn, p. 281.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

This shift created a difficult state of affairs for the British Empire, as its Muslim subjects might perceive that a war against the Ottoman empire was a war against Islam. If this was the case, the situation might spark up the pan-Islamic movements in India, Egypt and elsewhere in the Empire. This was a precarious situation that Kaiser Wilhelm and the German Intelligence Bureau of the east were eager to exploit. While Enver Pasha was willing to work with the Germans to this end, he was not himself a pan-Islamist. According to Charles Haley: 'It is true that Enver was a Muslim and unquestionably true that he believed in God; yet one cannot derive from his commentaries the idea that he was a devout Muslim.'<sup>84</sup> Moreover, Haley pointed out that Enver used pan-Islamism as a political vehicle but only until 1912. After that he saw more opportunity in alliances with European empires, especially Germany. This led Enver to make relations strong with the German Empire, but when it became strategically and politically convenient he was happy to pick up the pan-Islamic banner if it pleased his German allies.

So with German war aims united with Pan-Islam, two antagonists of the British Empire were linked and this was cause for much fear. Kitchener, Grey, Asquith, and Churchill all had reason to fear a pan-Islamic revival, as they had all experienced it in various forms. It was a central issue in relations with the 'East'. David French pointed out the recurring theme in British attitudes since the Indian Mutiny of 1857:

Although the Indian Mutiny had involved both Moslems and Hindus it had centred around the Moslem King of Delhi, whose dynasty had once ruled most of India. Henceforth, the British saw Islam as perhaps the most potential source of danger to their rule. The lessons of the Mutiny were reinforced by the difficulties and humiliations the British experienced in suppressing the Mahdist movement in Sudan in the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>85</sup>

This took an increasing toll on Churchill's perception and the overall British opinion of the Islamic world. Such writers as John Buchan (who wrote the spy thriller *Greenmantle* (1916)) explored the possibility of the Germans inciting the Muslim world to rise up and wage jihad against the British. This was not just happening in fiction, however. As early as August 1914, Churchill was receiving intelligence reports of possible pan-Islamic movements. A letter from Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Mark Sykes to Churchill on 24 August 1914 confirmed that Germany was 'straining every nerve to involve Turkey and so cause if possible a pan-Islamic diversion against us, and as Caucasian complication for Russia on the Armenian frontier'.<sup>86</sup>

Churchill had an increasing fear for the well-being of imperial interests in the Middle East, Central Asia and India. Churchill saw the Turkish

<sup>84</sup> Charles Haley, 'The desperate Ottoman: Enver Paşa and the German empire (Part 1)', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 30/1 (1994), pp. 1–51, at p. 12.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>86</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Mark Sykes to Churchill, 24 Aug. 1914, CHAR/13/45/127.

entry as an opportunity to unite the Balkan states against their traditional foe, an idea that delighted Lloyd George and Asquith, who had always pushed for Gladstone's dream of a Europe free from Turkey, a political position Churchill had rejected until the Turkish entry into the war. In October 1914 Asquith wrote: 'few things would give me greater pleasure than to see the Turkish Empire finally disappear from Europe'.<sup>87</sup> Endeavouring to create a new front that was not bogged down, Churchill, Asquith, Kitchener and Grey set about to attack what seemed the most vulnerable position of the Ottoman empire, the Dardanelles. This would have allowed the British navy to demonstrate its power in the East, protect the Suez Canal, and would lead directly to Constantinople, which (if captured) might dissuade any pan-Islamic movements.

It was Churchill's original contention that it would require a large naval and expeditionary force to attack Gallipoli because he knew the tenacity and courage of the Ottoman warriors. This is reflected in Cabinet Secretary Maurice Hankey's notes from a Cabinet meeting of 25 November: 'Mr. Churchill suggested that the ideal method for defending Egypt was an attack on the Gallipoli Peninsula. This if successful, would give us control of the Dardanelles, and we could dictate terms at Constantinople. This, however was a very difficult operation requiring a large force.'<sup>88</sup> This opinion was agreed to by Admiral Oliver, who suggested that 'troop transports should be kept in Egypt sufficient to transport a division of troops to the Dardanelles should it become possible to assemble men in the future'.<sup>89</sup> Churchill sent this to Kitchener, but Kitchener thought that troop transports were not necessary at the present time.

Kitchener's motives might best be explained by David French's argument that the authors of the Dardanelles were influenced by orientalist motives. He argued: 'In British eyes the Turks were not a western nation but a backward eastern power, whose government was unstable and faction-ridden.'<sup>90</sup> This made Constantinople a 'glittering prize', one that was 'all the more attractive by the conviction that [it] would fall into the Entente's lap with very little effort'. French concludes by arguing, 'Nothing else can explain adequately the willingness of Asquith, Grey, Churchill and Kitchener to push ahead with the Dardanelles operation as a purely naval venture.'<sup>91</sup>

This, of course, unfairly groups Churchill with the other members of the Cabinet. While French revealed evidence of Grey operating in the orientalist paradigm, there is very little evidence that Churchill did as it relates to his dealings with the Ottoman empire. However, French made the argument that Churchill was operating in this paradigm based on

<sup>87</sup> French, 'Prestige', p. 51.

<sup>88</sup> Churchill in Cabinet minutes, 25 Nov. 1914, *WSC, C, III*, pt 1, p. 278.

<sup>89</sup> Gilbert, *WSC*, p. 221.

<sup>90</sup> French, 'Origins', p. 214.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 215–16.

his testimony at the Dardanelles Commission. Churchill had argued that once the British fleet broke through the defences of the Dardanelles 'a daily shelling of a moderate character at stated intervals, with parleys and bargaining' would have eventually caused 'the enemies of the Young Turks to unite, overthrow them and make peace'.<sup>92</sup> French argued that 'Churchill's belief that this would have happened had the fleet got through rested little more on his conviction of the innate inferiority and poor fighting qualities of non-European troops'.<sup>93</sup>

But this overlooks the notion that Churchill may have considered that those friendly to the British such as Djavid Bey, Ahmed Djemal Pasha and others could lead a coup against the pro-German contingent or that even Enver himself could be convinced to leave the Central Powers alliance. This was a serious possibility in Churchill's mind. On 19 March 1915, Churchill spoke with Captain William Hall, the director of Naval Intelligence, regarding intelligence from Constantinople. He informed Churchill that he had been in negotiations with Talaat Bey, the Turkish minister of the interior. According to Hall, Talaat said: 'Many of [Constantinople's] most influential citizens would welcome an immediate break with the Germans and prayers were even being offered up at mosques of the city for the arrival of the British fleet'.<sup>94</sup>

There were other factors which belie an 'orientalist motive' behind the creation of the Dardanelles offensive. The first was that a precedent had already been laid for such an operation. Arthur Marder pointed out that the real root of the operation lay in the previous plans drawn up by the CID (Committee of Imperial Defence) in 1906 in case war had arisen with Turkey over the Sinai boundary dispute.<sup>95</sup> Though the plans included a joint attack and not a strictly naval operation, they did lay the ground work for such an operation.

Another factor which points away from an 'orientalist motive' was the two initial military actions taken against Turkey: the Indian government's force landed at Fao and the cutting of Turkish railway lines to Alexandria by the British navy. The latter played a large role in the Cabinet's estimation of the Ottoman empire's ability to wage war, because Turkish authorities almost immediately surrendered under fire from the British navy and agreed to destroy their own trains. This indicates that the opinion of Turkish military inferiority was derived, at least in part, from their initial military blunders, rather than some preconceived notion of racial inferiority. Gilbert reinforces this point, by noting that this event 'appeared proof that the Turks were not serious opponents and encouraged the hope that no great military effort would be needed to force

<sup>92</sup> See Dardanelles Commission of Inquiry: Statement by Churchill, 19 Sept. 1916 CHAR 2/79/1; French, 'Origins', p. 219.

<sup>93</sup> French, 'Origins', p. 219.

<sup>94</sup> William Hall to Churchill, 19 March 1915, Gilbert, *WSC*, p. 359.

<sup>95</sup> Arthur Marder, *From Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, II (London, 1965), p. 199.

Turkey out of the war'.<sup>96</sup> Churchill's own testimony in the Dardanelles Commission stated that:

The incident [was] not without significance, because it had helped to form the opinion in our mind as to the degree of resistance which might in all circumstances be expected from Turkey. What kind of Turk was this we were fighting? ... I must say that it was always in my mind that we were not dealing with a thoroughly efficient military power, and that it was quite possible that we could get into parley with them.<sup>97</sup>

The third major factor affecting the decision to open an attack on the Dardanelles, which French largely ignores, stemmed from strategic necessity. Though Churchill wanted his attack on the Dardanelles and Gallipoli more and more, there were no troops to help him realize his ambitions. However, the situation in the east was deteriorating, with Russia appealing for a distraction for the Turks to ease its position in the Caucasus.

Upon learning of the Russian appeal, Grey sent a letter to Kitchener and Churchill asking if a 'naval action would be able to prevent the Turks sending more men into the Caucasus and thus denuding Constantinople'.<sup>98</sup> A combination of several expert opinions, including Hankey and Kitchener himself, pushed for an attack at the Dardanelles. It was in this climate that Churchill and Kitchener opted for a purely naval operation due to a coupling of the poor showing of Turkish tactics outside of Alexandria and because of strategic requirement to alleviate the Russians, not because of the 'conviction held by most Englishmen that the Turk was inherently inferior to the white man'.<sup>99</sup> Though this may have played some role in the early thinking of many of the War Cabinet members, it has been overstated.

Churchill sent a telegram to Vice-Admiral Carden asking whether 'forcing the Dardanelles by ships alone was a practical option'.<sup>100</sup> Carden acquiesced to Churchill's wishes, noting that: 'They might be forced by extended operations with a large number of ships.'<sup>101</sup> Seeking glory for himself and the navy that he commanded, Churchill was quick to adopt the plan, with the blessing of Kitchener and Admirals Jackson and Oliver. However, the First Sea Lord, Admiral Jacky Fisher, unfalteringly believed an expeditionary force was required to take the Gallipoli peninsula. Asquith too was opposed to such a scheme. He wrote to Venetia Stanley on 5 December 1914 regarding Churchill's plan, stating that: 'His violent mind is at present set on Turkey and Bulgaria and he wants to

<sup>96</sup> Gilbert, *WSC*, p. 222.

<sup>97</sup> Winston Churchill, statement for the Dardanelles Commission; Gilbert, *WSC, C*, III, pt 2, pp. 1568–71.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>99</sup> French, 'Origins', p. 212.

<sup>100</sup> Churchill to Admiral Carden Gilbert, *WSC*, p. 234.

<sup>101</sup> Admiral Carden to Winston Churchill, *WSC, C*, III, pt 2, p. 380.

organize a heroic adventure against Gallipoli and the Dardanelles; to which I am altogether opposed'.<sup>102</sup>

It is easy to understand why Churchill was apt to adopt Carden's plan. Such a naval victory would redeem Churchill's earlier failure at Antwerp, demonstrate British naval superiority, reduce the number of casualties, and perhaps aid in bringing an end to the war in Europe.<sup>103</sup> Another factor that played a role in Churchill's willingness to jump at an all-naval operation on the Dardanelles was his previous interest in such operations. This interest was visible as early as 1900 when Churchill's fiction *Savrola* (1900) was published. The last act of this novel ends with what Churchill would later call in his book *My Early Life*, 'an ironclad fleet forcing a sort of Dardanelles to quell the rebellious capital'.<sup>104</sup>

Assuming victory, Churchill and the Admiralty laid out a principally benevolent policy that concluded with the assertion that 'all religious buildings, especially mosques, and objects venerated by Moslems will be treated with the utmost respect'.<sup>105</sup> Gilbert insinuates that Churchill added this declaration as a warning to Kitchener following his destruction of the Mahdi's tomb in Sudan. However, such statements could have risen from Churchill's fear of angering British Muslim subjects and to prevent a pan-Islamic movement. Certainly this fear was increasing in Churchill, whose personal notes from early January 1915 contend:

It is in Asia that a natural and appropriate sphere [of] action will be formed for the unorganized armies of Turkey, where the weight of Islam will be drawn into the struggle on the German side. The Mohammedan influence in Asia will carry with it all kindred forces along in Egypt and along the North-African shore. It is in Asia, through Mesopotamia, Persia, Afghanistan, and ultimately India that England will be struck at and her crown of acquisitions cancelled out. India is the target, Islam is the propellant, and the Turk is the projectile.<sup>106</sup>

Churchill was not the only minister who wanted be aligned with Muslim sympathies after the defeat of the Ottoman empire. At a War Council meeting on 19 March 1915, Sir Edward Grey wanted to set up an 'independent Moslem State in the Arab provinces of the Turkish Empire'.<sup>107</sup> There was, however, still a great deal of disagreement among the various departments as to what should be done in the Middle East once the Ottoman empire fell. For instance, Lewis Harcourt, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, believed that Mesopotamia should become 'an outlet for Indian immigration and suggested offering the Holy Places as a mandate to the United States'.<sup>108</sup> At the same meeting, Kitchener and

<sup>102</sup> Asquith to Venetia Stanley, 5 Dec. 1914, in Brock, *Asquith*, p. 327.

<sup>103</sup> The siege of Antwerp in 1914 represented a significant loss for the British navy. See Richard Hough, *The Great War at Sea: 1914–18* (Oxford, 1983).

<sup>104</sup> Churchill, *My Early Life*, p. 154.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>106</sup> Winston Churchill, personal notes, Jan. 1916, CHAR/ 2/71/6–9.

<sup>107</sup> Gilbert, *WSC*, p. 355.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373.



Crewe argued to 'transfer Mecca, the centre of the Islamic world from Turkish to British control, rather than let the Turkish Empire remain intact and thereby make it possible for the Holy Lands of Islam to fall under Russian domination'.<sup>109</sup> Churchill also sought to determine the fate of the Ottoman empire and threw himself into the War Council's partitionist campaign. In a War Council meeting on 19 March 1915 Churchill indicated that he thought that Britain 'did not intend to leave this inefficient and out-of-date nation [Turkey], which had long misruled one of the most fertile countries in the world [i.e. Mesopotamia], still in its possession!' He further said that 'Turkey had long shown herself to be inefficient as a governing Power and it was time for us to make a clean sweep'.<sup>110</sup>

This reversed what Churchill had originally thought regarding the Turkish role in the world after the war. This reversal of his opinion has even baffled Gilbert, who wrote: 'These extreme sentiments were in direct and violent contrast to Churchill's earlier sympathies for the Young Turks and their revolution.'<sup>111</sup> These particular minutes have led some historians such as Trumbull Higgins and David French to suggest that Churchill was merely a 'Turko-phobe',<sup>112</sup> and that he 'believed in the innate inferiority of Asiatic troops'.<sup>113</sup> However, these conclusions ignored Churchill's earlier attempts to keep Turkey as a British ally and ignored Churchill's personal relationship with members of the Young Turks. It may be as likely that Churchill simply felt personally affronted by Enver and the other Turks who sided against him.

Despite Churchill's blueprint for victory, and at the behest of Kitchener and Fisher, the War Council decided to send a small battalion of land troops. This decision proved fatal to the execution of the Mediterranean offensive, leaving the expeditionary force outmanned, unsupplied and unable to assist the naval assaults, which were being repelled by the Turkish forts on the Dardanelle straits. Kitchener, who had originally called for troops, 'would not release his last regular division, the Twenty-ninth', for fear of their requirement in France.<sup>114</sup> Churchill realized that without British regulars the offensive push would fail against their fierce foe. Churchill was furious and tried to intervene at a War Council meeting on 26 February 1915. He said that 'the 29th Division would not make the difference between failure and success in France, but might well make the difference in the East'. He said he wanted the record to reflect that 'he dissented altogether from the retention of the 29th Division in this

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 355.

<sup>110</sup> Winston Churchill, 19 March 1915, War Council Meeting Minutes, in Gilbert, *WSC, C*, III, pt 1, pp. 715–16.

<sup>111</sup> Gilbert, *WSC*, p. 356.

<sup>112</sup> Trumbull Higgins, *Winston Churchill and the Dardanelles* (London, 1963), p. 43.

<sup>113</sup> French, 'Origins', p. 220.

<sup>114</sup> Raymond Callahan, 'What about the Dardanelles?', *The American Historical Review*, 78/3 (1973), pp. 641–8, at p. 646.



country. If a disaster occurred in Turkey owing to the insufficiency of troops, he must disclaim all responsibility'.<sup>115</sup>

As it became apparent that Churchill's scheme to take the Dardanelles and Gallipoli was failing, Churchill became more depressed. After being asked to resign from the Admiralty and appointed Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster under the coalition government, on 14 August 1915 he spent some time with his old friend Wilfrid. S. Blunt. Blunt believed that 'Churchill might go mad' and noted that while Churchill sat painting, he said that 'there is more blood than paint on these hands ... All those thousands of men killed. We thought it would be a little job and so it might have been if it had been done the right way.'<sup>116</sup>

Churchill's statement of a 'little job' illustrated his frustration with the eastern front and could easily be interpreted as a dismissive imperialist remark. However, it could just as easily be understood as frustration with how the front was waged and the fact there was a front there at all. It must be remembered that Churchill believed until the very end that Turkish neutrality was a possibility and that he personally knew the Turkish leadership, of which he reminded his readers in *The World Crisis: The Aftermath* (1929).<sup>117</sup>

After the war, Churchill's view on Turkey changed yet again. As Minister of War and as Colonial Secretary, Churchill maintained a relatively positive view of Turkey. His Cabinet memorandum of 7 June 1920 strongly criticized the Treaty of Sèvres, which awarded Thrace and Smyrna to Greece, as unjust and noted that it was unenforceable, because it 'would condemn to anarchy and barbarism for an indefinite period the greater part of the Turkish Empire'.<sup>118</sup> One of Churchill's reasons for seeing the Treaty of Sèvres as unenforceable was because the only army that could enforce it, owing to commitments in Europe and cost, was the Greek army. Churchill argued that this meant, 'it was not Britain and India and Allenby that they had to endure and for a time obey, but Greece the hated and despised of generations'.<sup>119</sup> While Churchill warned of the perils of the Treaty, Lloyd George welcomed the ramifications of Sèvres. He saw it as a moment in which Greece could help ultimately cripple Turkey while simultaneously realizing the 'Megali Idea' or the Greek nationalist idea that a Greek state should encompass all regions inhabited by ethnically Greek people.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Winston Churchill in a War Council meeting, 26 Feb. 1915, in *WSC*, p. 310.

<sup>116</sup> Elizabeth Longford, *A Pilgrimage of Passion: The Life of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt* (London, 2007), p. 409.

<sup>117</sup> Churchill, *World Crisis*, V, p. 356.

<sup>118</sup> Winston Churchill, memorandum, 7 June 1920; Gilbert, *WSC*, C, IV, pt 2, p. 1116.

<sup>119</sup> Churchill, *World Crisis*, V, p. 367.

<sup>120</sup> See Michael Frinefrock, 'Atatürk, Lloyd George and the Megali Idea: cause and consequence of the Greek Plan to seize Constantinople from the Allies, June–August 1922', *The Journal of Modern History*, 52/1 (1980), pp. D1047–D1066. Recent scholarship based on intelligence intercepts indicates how far Lloyd George was willing to realize an enlarged Greece. See Daniel MacArthur-Seal, 'Intelligence and Lloyd George: secret diplomacy in the Near East 1920–1922', *The Historical Journal*, 56/3 (2013), pp 707–28.

However, this balance of power shifted rapidly in early September 1922, after the Turkish Nationalists defeated the Greeks, reclaimed Smyrna, and began marching toward Chanak with the intention of forcing the occupying forces out of Turkey and reclaiming Constantinople. On their march the Turkish Nationalists encountered the British garrison at Chanak and a standoff ensued. Lloyd George and the Cabinet issued harsh ultimatums threatening war if the Nationalists continued, but their leader Mustapha Kemal (Atatürk) refused to yield. Though Churchill was initially reluctant, he agreed to acquiesce with Lloyd George's view that Turkey should be kept out of Europe in a Cabinet meeting on 15 September.<sup>121</sup> The next day they released a press communiqué which implied that France, the dominions and the Balkan states were all as resolute as Lloyd George and Churchill to halt the Turkish Nationalists. It was released to the press before any external powers were made aware of it and its aggressive tone alienated the British public, who were still reeling from the First World War.

Churchill's reversal on his Turkish position shocked his colleagues. Lord Beaverbrook was 'astonished to find Churchill ... in complete agreement with the Prime Minister's Near East Policy'.<sup>122</sup> Sir Maurice Hankey, Lloyd George's Cabinet Secretary, recorded that he thought Churchill, who had been 'a strong Turko-phile had swung round' and that he was now 'violently Turko-phobe and even phil-Hellenic'.<sup>123</sup> He was aware that such a sharp turn would need an explanation in his memoirs, *The World Crisis* (1929), saying:

So having done my utmost for three years to procure a friendly peace with Mustapha Kemal and the withdrawal of the Greeks from Asia Minor, and having consistently opposed my friend the Prime Minister upon this issue, I now found myself whole-heartedly upon his side in resisting the consequences of the policy I had condemned.<sup>124</sup>

It is unclear why Churchill changed his mind on Turkey during that Cabinet meeting but certainly one major factor was his knowledge of the Armenian massacres which had been perpetrated by the Turks.<sup>125</sup> Gilbert wrote that Churchill 'had been shocked by the Turkish slaughter of Armenians throughout 1921'.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, Churchill was circulating memoranda on the dangers to Armenia as early as August 1919,<sup>127</sup> and in his memoirs he noted that news of Turkish atrocities committed on Greek and Armenian Christians 'appeared daily'.<sup>128</sup> This combined with

<sup>121</sup> Cabinet minutes, 15 Sept. 1922, CHAR 22/15.

<sup>122</sup> Max Atkin (Lord Beaverbrook), *The Decline and Fall of Lloyd George* (New York, 1963), p. 161.

<sup>123</sup> Stephen Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets* (London, 1972), pp. 288–9.

<sup>124</sup> Churchill, *World Crisis*, abridged edn, p. 422.

<sup>125</sup> For a full exploration on Churchill's reversal regarding Turkey see W. Dockter, *Churchill and the Islamic World: Orientalism Empire and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (London, 2015), pp. 185–200.

<sup>126</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Winston S Churchill, IV: The Stricken World 1917–1922* (London, 1975), p. 825.

<sup>127</sup> Churchill Memo 'The Danger to Armenia', 25 Aug. 1919; CAB/24/87.

<sup>128</sup> Churchill, *World Crisis*, abridged edn, pp. 416–17.

Churchill's watchful eye on public opinion and his inclination towards action, probably made his switch to Lloyd George's position relatively simple, despite the years he had put in working to a more sympathetic resolution with Turkey. But Churchill and Lloyd George misread public opinion. Their unwavering stance against the Turks was viewed as irresponsible by political colleagues and the press alike, because it 'gave the impression of being anxious to provoke another war'.<sup>129</sup> *The Times* accused the Cabinet of being: 'Rash and vacillating and incapable.'<sup>130</sup> This opinion was echoed in the *Daily Mail* and several other national papers. As a result Churchill's support of Lloyd George's anti-Turk position backfired and destroyed the Coalition government in October 1922, one month prior to the dissolution of the Sultanate in Turkey. Winston Churchill never stood as a Liberal again.

Ultimately, Churchill had a much more complex, if not sympathetic, relationship with the Ottoman empire than is typically understood. The orientalist views of his youth quickly evaporated amidst his desire for adventure and the ever-present Conservative view of the Ottoman empire as an ally. Undoubtedly, Churchill's views of the Ottoman empire oscillated from a sympathetic disposition, during his soldiering years, to outright disdain during the First World War. His dynamic relationship was built on Conservative party, geopolitics as well as Liberal aspirations for Europe. While Churchill's views of the Ottoman empire were informed by his political party, they were not dominated by it. As a Conservative, Churchill criticized Salisbury's placation of the Ottomans and as a Liberal Churchill strived to create British Ottoman alliances, even when it was politically unpopular. This must be balanced with his decision to requisition the Turkish ships in 1914 and to stand with Lloyd George on the Chanak Crisis. Despite these inconsistencies Churchill's desire to find and realize a 'great Turkish policy' was a major component of his world-view prior to the First World War and afterwards he maintained a positive view of Turco-British relations.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 552.

<sup>130</sup> *The Times*, 2 Oct. 1922.